

# RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND CONFLICT IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

## Written Testimony for U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

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### Introduction

The testimony I am going to present today is based on the key findings and implications from a Mercy Corps report titled [Fear of the Unknown](#), which I co-authored with Adam Lichtenheld, who is now based at Stanford University.

This study was motivated by recent trends in intercommunal conflict in northern Nigeria. In recent years, commentators have increasingly highlighted the religious dimensions of intercommunal conflict, suggesting that this violence is religiously motivated. Other commentators have de-emphasized the role of religion and instead characterize these conflicts as a consequence of increased banditry and growing resource competition.

To help fill the evidence gaps at the heart of these debates, we posed three core research questions:

- First, what are the main drivers and motivations for violence in north central and northwest Nigeria?
- Second, what are the specific processes by which religion catalyzes violent conflict?
- Third, what mechanisms have communities used to prevent violence, and mitigate religious tensions?

### How did Mercy Corps undertake this research?

To answer these research questions, we drew on multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources. To examine broad patterns and trends in violence, we analyzed three different sources of violent events data in 12 states in Northcentral and Northwest Nigeria over the past ten years- ACLED, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Nigeria Watch.



We complemented this analysis of violent events data with two phases of field research in Kaduna and Kano states. The first phase used 165 in-depth interviews with key informants and local community members in both states to capture qualitative insights into conflict dynamics, processes, and pathways to violence. The second phase of field research used a survey of 750 residents in 15 communities across the two states to quantitatively evaluate the factors associated with individuals' support for and willingness to participate in violence.

## What did we learn?

In this testimony, I want to highlight four key findings from our report that are relevant to the core aims of this hearing.

### Drivers of Violence

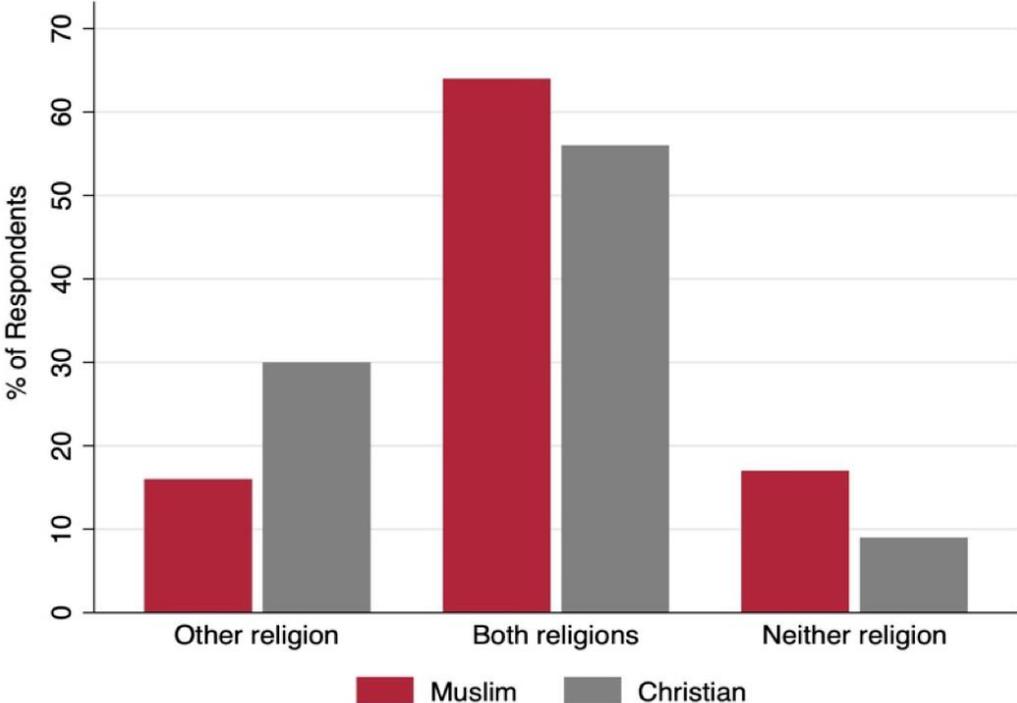
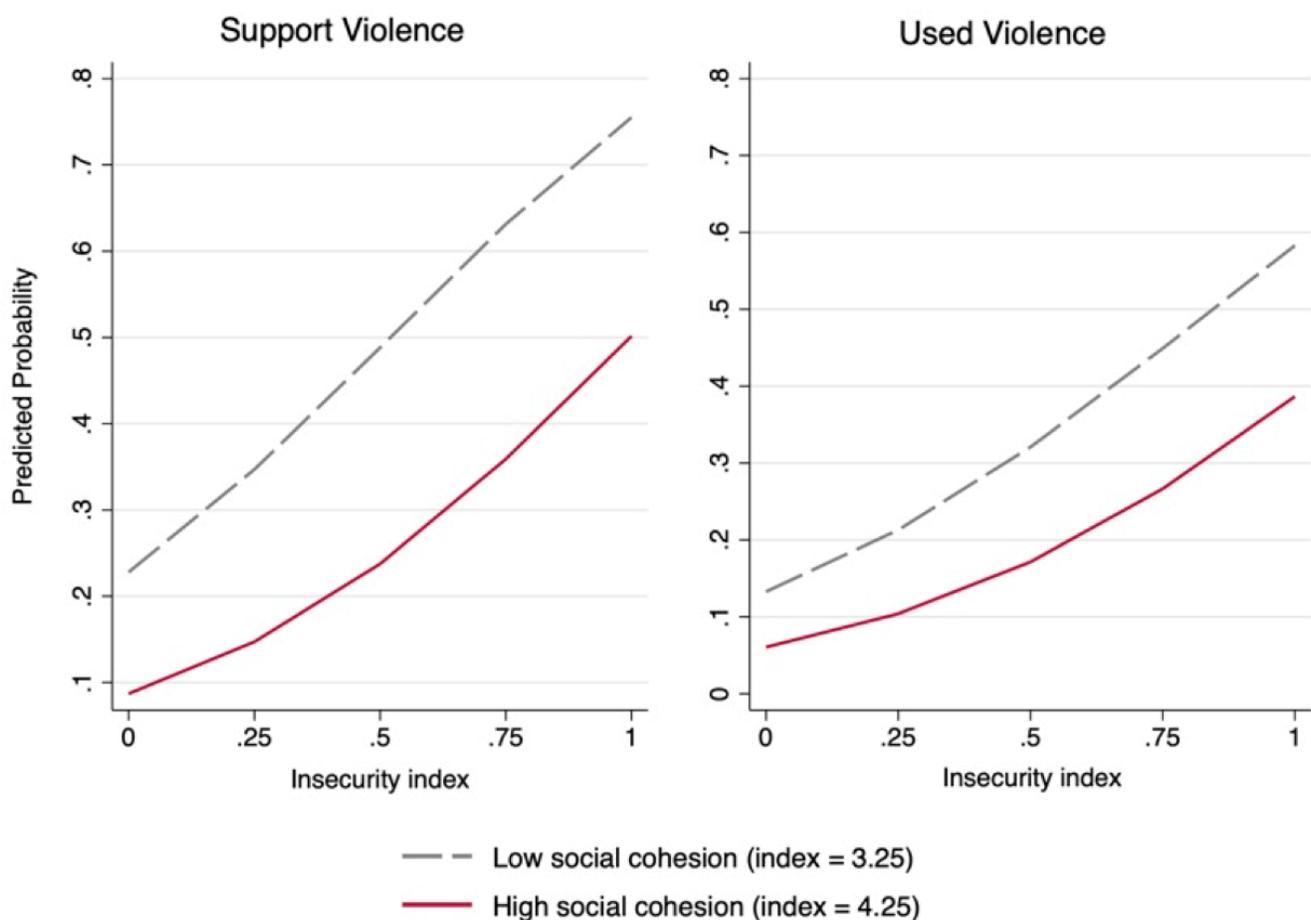


Figure 1. Who is primarily responsible for violence in your area?

Our first key finding is that only some violence has been inter-religious in nature, and Muslims and Christians have been both perpetrators and victims. Analysis of data from ACLED, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Nigeria Watch indicate that from 2011 to 2020, only nine percent of attacks explicitly targeted or were carried out by religious groups, and only 10 percent of fatalities were ascribed to conflicts over a religious issue. This finding from the violent events datasets is supported by our survey data, in which majority of Muslim and Christian survey respondents said that members of both faiths are responsible for violence in their area, as opposed to pinning blame solely on one side (Figure 1).

Our second key finding is that rather than being driven by religious belief or hatred, violence that falls along religious lines is typically a consequence of insecurity and a lack of social cohesion between ethno-religious groups. Our survey data shows that the more religious people are, the less likely they are to support or engage in violence, and this holds across both Muslims and Christians

Instead, we found that insecurity and weakened social cohesion combine to lead to violence. An increase in perceived insecurity corresponds with a 25 to 35 percent increase in respondents' support for the use of violence and their willingness to engage in it. Meanwhile, a decrease in social cohesion, including intergroup trust, is associated with a 43 to 60 percent increase in respondents' willingness to endorse violence (Figure 2). This dynamic was echoed in our qualitative interviews, including by a community leader, who described this pattern saying "I call it 'fear of the unknown' because people know they can be attacked if there is a crisis."



**Figure 2.** The relationship between insecurity, social cohesion, and violence in Northern Nigeria

### How Religious Identity can Catalyze Violence

Our third key finding is that while we did not find that religious belief or hatred is a root cause of violence, we did find evidence that religious identities provide opportunity and motivation for both elites and ordinary individuals to mobilize violence. I'll briefly illustrate both of these pathways of mobilization through direct quotes from our qualitative interviews.

The first pathway is that political and religious leaders intentionally politicize or enhance the salience of religious identity to spur people to action, particularly around elections, which create windows of vulnerability by raising the potential for shifts in power between groups. An interviewee in Kano state described this, saying “It is a known fact that Kano people are very religious... So if you want to win a Kano man over, use religion as a cover. This is what most of our leaders are using against us. Using religion as a tool to stir up conflict.”

The second pathway is that members of the public make solidarity claims to co-ethnics or co-religionists to garner support in a quarrel, which can allow interpersonal disputes to escalate into conflicts between identity groups. An interviewee described this pattern, saying “[Conflict] starts with something as little as misunderstanding between two people of the opposite religion, but later turns into religious violence so the perpetrators can get backup.”

## **Mechanisms to Reduce Violence**

Our fourth key finding is that although we find that religious leaders can amplify conflict, they can also be custodians of peace.

The analysis in our report shows that survey respondents who say that religious leaders help resolve disputes in their area are significantly *less* likely to support violence (Figure 3). This finding holds no matter how often people say that religious leaders are actually successful in resolving disputes.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

To sum up, the big picture message to take away from my testimony and our report on this topic is that recent intercommunal violence in northern Nigeria is not simply a consequence of religious discrimination or persecution.

Rather, our analysis indicates that the violence that we are observing is a result of a confluence of factors including governance gaps (particularly in security provision), a lack of social cohesion and trust between groups, and the mobilization of religious identities by both elites and ordinary individuals.

I'll close by highlighting two sets of recommendations that follow from these findings:

First, we recommend a shift in how we think and talk about conflict across religious divides away from a picture of a “clash of civilizations” that is a root cause of violence towards an appreciation of the role of religion as a potential catalyst and mobilizer that interacts with other root causes and is deployed strategically by both mass and elite actors.

Second, this shift in mindset and framing leads us to recommend a set of specific programming interventions to address intercommunal conflict in northern Nigeria. This includes interventions that focus on preventing the escalation of disputes into violence by [training religious leaders \(and other local leaders\) in negotiation and dispute resolution](#), by strengthening local early warning systems, so that trained local leaders can intervene before disputes escalate, and by paying specific attention to windows of risk, such as elections. We also recommend interventions that [address root causes of violence by strengthening inter-group interactions and trust](#) (especially around natural resource management) and [interventions that address](#)

[governance shortcomings](#) by increasing the effectiveness and accountability of security and service provision. Thank you.